

North Korean Aesthetic Theory: Aesthetics, Beauty, and “Man”

ALZO DAVID-WEST

Introduction

Aesthetics is not a subject usually associated with North Korea in Western scholarship, the usual tropes being autocracy, counterfeiting, drugs, human-rights abuse, famine, nuclear weapons, party-military dictatorship, Stalinism, and totalitarianism. Where the arts are concerned, they are typically seen as crude political propaganda. One British museum specialist writes that North Korean visual art is an “art under control,” and one Russian historian insists that North Korean literature is devoid of the “beauty of language.”¹ As the short turns of phrase and value judgments indicate, there has been no real attempt in English to engage the North Korean aesthetic on descriptive terms.

North Korea is not a liberal democracy, and art in the country is beholden to party-state policy through the authority of the government-run General Federation of the Unions of Literature and the Arts of Korea. But besides “purely” political prerequisites, official policy also requires that aesthetics be factored into state-overseen artistic creation. As understood in the Western tradition descending from the Greeks and Alexander Baumgarten, aesthetics is a concept that deals firstly with sensate perception, not art or beauty. On the other hand, there are the influential eighteenth- and nineteenth-century conceptions that aesthetics is primarily about individual subjectivity, the beautiful, and art for art’s sake.

Western aesthetics, however, cannot be arbitrarily imposed in the North Korean case, which is historically conditioned by 518 years of feudal Neo-Confucian rule (1392–1910), thirty-five years of Japanese colonialism

Alzo David-West is a lecturer at Aichi Prefectural University in Japan, an associate editor for *North Korean Review*, and an ABD in communication at the European Graduate School in Switzerland. He holds an MA in English from East Carolina University and a BA magna cum laude in English from Chowan University in the United States. His publications have appeared in *Art Journal*, *Cha*, *Cosmos and History*, *Cultural Logic*, *Essays in the Philosophy of Humanism*, *International Forum of Psychoanalysis*, *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, *Jung Journal*, *Korean Studies*, *North Korean Review*, *Review of Korean Studies*, and *Transnational Literature*.

(1910–1945), five years of a Soviet Army–overseen Stalinist “revolution” (1945–1950), and national Stalinism.² Moreover, the Korean terms for *aesthetics*, *art*, and *beauty*—*mihak* (beautiful learning), *misul* (beautiful technique/method), and *arūmdaum* (beautiffulness)—do not regard beauty in itself as primary. Rather, in North Korean aesthetic theory, the concept of the beautiful depends on the ideological integration of the moral and political.³

Aesthetics

The importance accorded to aesthetics in North Korea is seen in the fact that the country holds annual aesthetics symposia such as the Aesthetics Forum on the Current Era and Ethnic-Racial Art (*Hyon shidae wa minjok yesul-e kwanhan mihak t'oranhoe*) and the Architectural Aesthetics Forum (*Konch'ok mihak t'oranhoe*). Aesthetics is also discussed in the official *Art Treatise* (Misullon, 1991), a work credited to the late Kim Jong Il, that addresses architecture, calligraphy, cinema and stage art, costume, craft, decoration, drawing, graphic and industrial design, painting, and printmaking in terms of the “Juche-oriented aesthetic view” (*chuch'e-ŭi mihak kwan*, literally, aesthetic view of the subject).⁴

Despite the circular and ritualistic style in which North Korean texts are written, there is an aesthetic theory to consider. But first, what is *Juche*, what is the “subject,” in the ruling ideology of the aesthetic? There are three basic definitions: (1) the subject is the Korean revolution (1955); (2) the subject is the spirit of political self-reliance (1965); and (3) the subject is a “man-centered” philosophy (1974). The subject, in short, is a *political program* and a *political anthropology* premised on nationalism and anthropocentrism.⁵ *Juche* aesthetics, for that matter, rejects Marxist aesthetics because the latter does not assume the “man-centered world outlook” in relation to cognition of the beautiful.⁶

Aesthetics in North Korea involves more than beauty, however. According to *Art Treatise*, the aesthetic encompasses appraisal, appreciation, aspirations, attitude, categories, change in space, charm, characteristics of structures, cognition, demands of the people, desires, education, emotions, features of nature, feelings, grasp of reality, ideals, intention of the painter, life, phenomena, principles, quality of a work of art, relations with human life, relations with reality, repercussions among the people, requirements, sense of the people, sentiments of brushwork, significance, stimulation for deep thought, tastes, understanding, value of the product, values of a structure, views, viewpoint, and so forth.

North Korean aesthetic theory attempts to organize the complex and manifold aesthetic in *Juche* political anthropology, which has a subjective idealist and voluntarist orientation, but also posits the existence of an objective world in which the subjective interaction of independence-striving human beings with the objective generates aesthetic experience:

The things and phenomena in the objective world are of value and become beautiful when they meet man's desire and aspiration for independence. Aesthetic desire and aesthetic ideal are concrete expressions of man's desire for independence; they are one aspect of man's noble spiritual requirement. Man's aesthetic desire and his aesthetic ideal find their clearest reflection in art and literature.⁷

Here, independence refers to the self-determination of the Korean ethnic-racial nation (*minjok*). Consequently, *Juche* aesthetics advances propositions such as "Man's aesthetic sense has a national and class character,"⁸ and "The aesthetic tastes of people have a national character because the people and their lives assume a social character."⁹

Notwithstanding the attempt *Juche* aesthetics makes to nationalize and politicize aesthetic experience, aesthetics is something that is not under complete ideological control. That is suggested in the distinction the theory observes between the "utilitarian and aesthetic values of a structure" and "utilitarian and aesthetic aspects," not to mention the "ideological and aesthetic viewpoint" and "ideological and artistic qualities."¹⁰ The implication is that aesthetics is *not* utility and that aesthetics is *not* ideology. Politically, *Juche* aesthetics cannot permit a separation. Therefore, stress is laid, for instance, on "combining" aesthetics and utilitarianism in order to create "beautiful and useful forms."¹¹

Beauty

Beauty is a significant concern in North Korean aesthetic theory, and the concept is anthropocentric as per the *Juche* view of aesthetics: "Beauty is in an independent man" (*Arimdaum-ŭn chajujök ingan-ege itta*), or "Beauty is in autonomous/independent human beings."¹² That is to say, there is no recognition of beauty without the human being. North Korean aesthetics defines the beautiful as (1) "those [externally existing] objects and phenomena which meet man's desire for independence and are emotionally grasped by him" and (2) "qualitative determination of things and phenomena which is expressed in their relations with man." The beautiful arouses "aesthetic feelings."¹³

Despite emphasis on independence in the first definition cited above, meeting that desire and aspiration alone is insufficient for something to be judged as beautiful in North Korean aesthetics. Beauty is an objective quality that inheres as a property in things, and beauty is felt through human emotion.¹⁴ But while emotion is decisive, this is not a passive reflection; it is an aesthetic process through "voluntary cognitive activity and emotional experience." Beautiful things are revealed through cognition/thinking, feelings/emotions, and attitude.¹⁵ As *Art Treatise* says, "Man's

recognition of the beautiful is subjective."¹⁶ So far, this is an *objective and subjective* theory of beauty.

North Korean aesthetic theory maintains that there is a "law of beauty"; evaluates objects and phenomena as either "beautiful" or "not beautiful"; strives to make the human the "master of the beautiful," the "master of the cognition of beauty and creation"; and claims to reflect the "interests of the broad masses," who constitute an independent "social community."¹⁷ Now, the theory of beauty is a *communitarian and normative* one, which raises the "aspirations and demands of the masses of people as the standard of beauty," in fact, as the "absolute standard of beauty."¹⁸ Here, the party establishes the standard, since the party represents the will of the national community, for example:

Ours is a beautiful land with beautiful mountains and limpid streams, a land full of treasures. Our socialist homeland has been converted into a land of bliss where the masses, freed from exploitation and oppression, are enjoying a free and cultured life to the full. No other land in this world could be a match in its beauty for our country which is vigorously advancing for the ultimate victory of the *Juche* revolutionary cause started on Mt. Paektu [by Kim Il Sung—AD]. The nature of this land is very beautiful *because the great leadership of the Party and leader has come into full bloom in all parts of our country*, which are replete with their noble virtues.¹⁹

Although *Art Treatise* affirms that the "same object may be felt to be beautiful or mean depending on man's class position," differences in aesthetic perception among North Korean social groups—bureaucrats, cadres, intellectuals, managers, peasants, soldiers, and workers—are not distinguished. Sociological distinctions are replaced with the abstract concepts of "man," "masses," and "social community." A *nationalist and populist* theory of beauty joins the *objective and subjective* and *communitarian and normative* theories. As the preceding long quote illustrates, the beauty of nature depends on mass party rule. Nature is beheld as beautiful because the national party is in power.

Previously, reference was made to the idea in *Juche* aesthetics that "aesthetic desire" and "aesthetic ideal" are part of "man's noble spiritual requirement" and expressive of the desire for political independence/autonomy. The idea informs understanding of the *communitarian-normative* and *nationalist-populist* components in the North Korean theory of beauty, which is also concerned with the "noble." That is seen in the view that a beautiful country is filled with the "noble virtues" of the party and leader. *Art Treatise* abounds with many other references to things that are noble. What is beautiful is what is noble, and what is noble is what is morally and politically correct.

"Man"

The problem of beauty in North Korean aesthetics is fundamentally a problem of "man" (*ingan*), human beings, for it is people who have the capacity of cognizing and feeling the beautiful and not-beautiful. Beauty is found and created in "man, society and nature." The sequence is not accidental: "man" is the "most important," the "master of the world," and "creates a beautiful life and makes nature and society more beautiful." But that is not all. "Man" is the "*most beautiful and powerful being in the world.*"²⁰ The qualification, however, is that "man" is not simply beautiful by belonging to the species *Homo sapiens*. There is "noble and beautiful man" and "vulgar and mean man."²¹

How does "man" become beautiful? Since the conception of the beautiful is moral and political, the beauty of "man" is expressed in "ideological and mental qualities." This consists mainly in "politico-ideological awareness," and it determines "man's aesthetic value." People must also be *mentally, morally, and physically noble* in order to be beautiful.²² That goes for people in real life, as well as in artistic portrayal. Since North Korea is a national-Stalinist state, it follows that the ideal type of beautiful people with noble characteristics are "genuinely communist men of the *Juche* type," unfailingly loyal to the party and leader.²³ The ideal person is a patriot and loyalist.

The concept of "man" here is *communitarian-normative* and *nationalist-populist*, amplifying the *subjective* in the North Korean theory of beauty. *Art Treatise* says, "It is man's nature to be fond of the beautiful."²⁴ This is a true statement if "man's nature" is understood as the socially and historically conditioned character structure of the human personality.²⁵ Every human society has possessed notions of beauty. In the North Korean case, "man" is beautiful in art when "ideological and mental beauty" and "plastic beauty" (rendered beauty in visual art) are in "perfect harmony." The first type of beauty is the primary, though. A "lovely" or "handsome" face does not replace "noble disposition."²⁶

Still, while "ideological and mental beauty" is the principle criterion, "formative beauty" is the "most important aesthetic quality," as it is through form that people are *ideologically and emotionally educated* and through form that *human life is adorned*. This quality is the "beauty of artistic representation" and "beauty embodied" in form.²⁷ The unified elements of formative beauty in "plastic form" are "harmony, balance, symmetry, rhythm, proportion, movement, three-dimensional quality and space." The problem, of course, is not exhausted, and there are other types of beauty to consider, such as "beauty of shapes" and "chromatic beauty" in expression and representation.²⁸

Suffice it to say, that North Korean aesthetic theory in its anthropocentric view of "man" is posited toward creating art that serves national, moral, and political edification, whether the artist produces "utilitarian art" or

"decorative art," a distinction *Art Treatise* makes.²⁹ In the case of porcelains and masterpieces, for example, besides beautiful, technically accomplished form, these works must contribute to "ennobling the emotional life of the people" and possess "good ideological quality."³⁰ The point is the "aesthetic education of man," to use a phrase from Friedrich von Schiller, that inspires North Korean citizens to be emotionally, intellectually, morally, and politically committed to the party-state.³¹

Conclusion

North Korean aesthetic theory requires further investigation in English-language aesthetics scholarship. Through a reading of *Art Treatise*, a collaborative work officially credited to leader Kim Jong Il, this essay descriptively identifies special problems of aesthetics, beauty, and "man" in North Korean aesthetic doctrine, which is derived from the nationalist political program and anthropocentric political anthropology of the state *Juche* ideology. What has been observed is that North Korean aesthetics is primarily not about beauty, but about the sensate experience of a national community of human beings and the moral education of that community through skillfully crafted forms.

In order to achieve the aim of moral education through aesthetic education, North Korean aesthetics enlists an apparently three-part theory of beauty: (1) *objective-subjective*: beauty exists in objective nature; beauty is a quality that inheres in things; and beauty is grasped through human acts of cognition/emotion; (2) *communitarian-normative*: beauty serves the social community; beauty is an expression of community morality; and beauty must be made a normal part of community life; (3) *nationalist-populist*: beauty manifests itself nationally; beauty is people oriented; and beauty is ensured through mass party rule. *Art Treatise* claims this is all "scientific."

North Korean aesthetics is national and engenders "ritualistic perceptions" based on a "singular self-referential interpretative framework" in culturally and historically conditioned circumstances. Consequently, the national perceptions cultivated among North Koreans in North Korea "are destined to clash with our own [Western] paradigms."³² Aesthetics, as coined by the Greeks, means to perceive with the senses, and in the North Korean case, one has the difficult task of learning how to perceive objective reality as it is reconstructed in North Korean aesthetic education and aesthetic experience. Descriptive method that suspends value judgments is necessary.

NOTES

1. Jane Portal, *Art under Control in North Korea* (London: Reaktion Books, 2005); and Tatiana Gabroussenko, *Soldiers on the Culture Front: Developments in the Early*

- History of North Korean Literature and Literary Policy* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2010), 1.
2. See Cheng Chen and Ji-Yong Lee, "Making Sense of North Korea: 'National Stalinism' in Comparative-Historical Perspective," *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 40, no. 4 (2007): 459–75.
 3. This is a Neo-Confucian inheritance in North Korea. Confucianism/Neo-Confucianism regards beauty as a moral concept and sees artistic success as depending on the degree to which the beautiful and the good are represented. Rodney L. Taylor, *Confucianism* (Philadelphia: Chelsea House, 2004), 86.
 4. Jong Il Kim, *Misullon: 1991-nyŏn 10-wŏl 16-il* [*Art Treatise: October 16, 1991*] (Chosŏn nodong dang ch'ulp'ansa, 1992). The official title in English is *On Fine Art*, but this translation is misleading since "fine art" implies "pure art," something North Korean art is not.
 5. Anthropocentrism should not be confused with humanism. See Alzo David-West, "'Man Is the Master of Everything and Decides Everything': De-Constructing the North Korean Juche Axiom," *Essays in the Philosophy of Humanism* 17, no. 2 (2009): 67–84.
 6. Jong Il Kim, *On Fine Art* (Pyongyang: Foreign Languages Publishing House, n.d.), 7, Naenara [My Country], <http://www.naenara.com.kp/en/book/reading.php?3+7> (accessed August 29, 2011).
 7. *Ibid.* 3–4.
 8. *Ibid.* 52.
 9. *Ibid.* 67.
 10. *Ibid.* 123, 144, 162, 163.
 11. *Ibid.* 123, 144, 146.
 12. *Ibid.* 2.
 13. *Ibid.* 3, 4.
 14. *Ibid.* 4.
 15. *Ibid.*
 16. *Ibid.*, 16.
 17. *Ibid.*, 3, 5, 7, 9.
 18. *Ibid.*, 7, 9.
 19. *Ibid.*, 60; emphasis added.
 20. *Ibid.*, 9; emphasis added.
 21. *Ibid.*, 139.
 22. *Ibid.*, 9.
 23. *Ibid.*, 10.
 24. *Ibid.*, 53.
 25. This definition of human nature is based on Erich Fromm.
 26. Kim, *On Fine Art*, 54.
 27. *Ibid.*, 16.
 28. *Ibid.*, 17.
 29. *Ibid.*, 26.
 30. *Ibid.*, 116, 168.
 31. *Ibid.*, 107, uses the phrase "ideological and aesthetic education of the masses." Cf. J. C. Friedrich Von Schiller, "Letters upon the Aesthetic Education of Man, 1794," contributed to the Internet Modern History Sourcebook by Paul Halsall, August 1998, Fordham University, <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/schiller-education.asp> (accessed August 29, 2011).
 32. Frank Hoffmann, "Brush, Ink, and Props: The Birth of Korean Painting," in *Exploring North Korean Arts*, ed. Rüdiger Frank (Nuremberg: Verlag für moderne Kunst, 2011), 145–80; 146–47. The author thanks Professor Hoffmann for providing a PDF of his essay before print publication of the parent volume.